

## The clear alternative to the king, the clown and the colonel

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/31898737) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/31898737>.

Rating:	<a href="#">General Audiences</a>
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Category:	<a href="#">F/M</a>
Fandoms:	<a href="#">Shadow and Bone (TV)</a> , <a href="#">The Grisha Trilogy - Leigh Bardugo</a>
Relationships:	<a href="#">The Darkling   Aleksander Morozova/Alina Starkov</a> , <a href="#">Mal Oretsev &amp; Alina Starkov</a>
Characters:	<a href="#">Alina Starkov</a> , <a href="#">The Darkling   Aleksander Morozova</a> , <a href="#">Mal Oretsev</a>
Additional Tags:	<a href="#">Conversations</a> , <a href="#">Street food</a> , <a href="#">Romance</a> , <a href="#">lots of appetites here</a> , <a href="#">Hurt/Comfort</a> , <a href="#">Childhood Memories</a> , <a href="#">Os Alta</a>
Language:	English
Series:	Part 2 of <a href="#">Crescent Moon</a>
Collections:	<a href="#">Week #17: Street food</a>
Stats:	Published: 2021-06-12 Words: 821 Chapters: 1/1

# The clear alternative to the king, the clown and the colonel

by [middlemarch](#)

## Summary

Alina was discovering it was possible to have quite a good conversation with Aleksander-- when he wasn't delirious.

## Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

- Inspired by [Restricted Work] by [middlemarch](#)

“You must be tired of lentils,” Alina said, scooping out another bowl of the interminable stew. She was planning to go out to forage again and had hopes that Aleksander would reveal there was a second cache, this one filled with cured meats, an aged cheese, dried fruit and rare spices from Kerch along with some more of the reliable dried lentils, though she had gone hungry enough in her life to settle for another sack of lentils and whatever herbs she could find.

“As I told you, we eat simply in the Little Palace. Herring, rye, cabbage. Lentils,” he said.

“Really? I’d hoped you were joking. What a disappointment. That was the only part I was definitely looking forward to,” Alina smiled. “Whose idea was it?”

“Mine,” he said, shrugging and then grimacing in pain. “My Grisha are not being raised to be pampered, feckless nobles. They do best with the wholesome food of the people.”

“Probably no one tells you they’d rather have chicken in cream sauce with capers or plum-cake,” Alina said. She would not have thought to when she first met him in the encampment, standing tall and solemn and brooking no disputes. Nor when he’d first rescued her from the murdering Fjerdans, making shadows into a fearsome weapon. This man, the one lying before her with his dark hair a little ruffled, his linen shirt open at the throat, he was someone altogether different.

“Probably,” he agreed.

“Is herring what you prefer to eat?” she asked. “Not that I have any way of getting it for you.”

“It’s not my favorite,” he admitted.

“What is your favorite? Again, not that I have any way of getting it for you, but it’s a curious kind of pleasure to think about things like that. Mal and I—” she broke off. What must Mal think of her now? Was he thinking of her at all? When she looked back at him, Aleksander was studying her face as if she were the most intriguing puzzle. “Back at Keramzin, in the orphanage, we liked to talk about it, what we’d eat if we could have anything. Cakes topped with whipped cream and fresh berries, bowls of soup with more than one dumpling. Spiced nuts, sakharnaya vata.”

“Food for a festival,” he remarked. “Or a fête.”

“Not necessarily. It was a great dream to go among the street vendors at the open market, to have even as little as one kopek each and spend it however we liked,” she said. “Not because the food was good for us or would keep you feeling full, just whatever made your mouth water.”

“I will not confirm this if you tell the other Grisha, but I do like the food the street vendors sell,” Aleksander said. “In market in Os Alta, there is one stall I would take you to—”

“You would take me to a street vendor? When we are in Os Alta?” Alina asked.

“Perhaps. I wouldn’t advertise the fact,” he said dryly.

“It’s not your habit to spend time with the other Grisha? You have to maintain a certain aloofness?” Alina offered. “I can’t imagine what you think could affect everyone’s reaction to the Darkling.”

“I don’t want it spread around that I have a sweet tooth,” he said.

“You have a sweet tooth?” Alina repeated and laughed. She would have thought he’d liked something tart or spiced, an intense flavor that was unusual, something only he would eat.

“See, that’s exactly what I mean,” he said. “I won’t be the subject of hilarity.”

“I don’t think you have to worry about that,” Alina said. “And I promise, I don’t gossip.”

“I’d buy you a twist of fresh iriska,” Aleksander said. “We could eat them walking through the market.”

“Aren’t they very sticky? And very sweet?” Alina said. He’d made her imagine it, some future where they walked together, nibbling on sweets, the day warm around them or twilight falling, some future that seemed very far away.

“Yes,” Aleksander said, with such a dreamy satisfaction in his tone Alina almost blushed to hear it. She suddenly wondered how his eyes would darken if she offered him a spoonful of honey, what it would be like to watch him lick the last golden drop from his finger.

“I’d spend my kopek on khachapuri,” Alina said quickly, startling him a little. “I’d let you have a bite if you wanted.”

“I’ve eaten more than my fair share of your food already,” he said. “I wouldn’t take any more from you.”

“You wouldn’t taking. I’d be sharing it. That’s all right, isn’t it?” she said, aware that they’d started talking about something else entirely.

“Indeed it is,” he said, in the tone of General Kirigan, the same tone that called forth shadows. “It’s all right” he said more softly, Aleksander again who called her Alya, who wanted something sweet in his mouth, sweet and secret.

## End Notes

Title is from Anthony Bourdain.

Khachapuri is a traditional Georgian dish of cheese-filled bread. The bread is leavened and allowed to rise and is shaped in various ways, usually with cheese in the middle and a crust which is ripped off and used to dip in the cheese. The filling contains cheese (fresh or aged, most commonly, specialized Khachapuri cheese), eggs and other ingredients.

It is very popular in Georgia, both in restaurants and as street food. As a Georgian staple food, the price of making khachapuri is used as a measure of inflation in different Georgian cities by the "khachapuri index," developed by the International School of Economics at Tbilisi State University. It is Georgia's national dish that is inscribed on the list of the Intangible cultural heritage of Georgia. On the behalf and initiative of Gastronomic Association of Georgia, the 27th of February was announced as the National Khachapuri Day, to celebrate Georgia's timeless signature pastry as well as to promote its recognition internationally.

iriska = toffee

kopek = smallest unit of Russian (aka Ravkan) currency

sakharnaya vata = candy floss/cotton candy

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